Easter Reflections:

Inspiring Messages for Holy Week

Lionel Hartley

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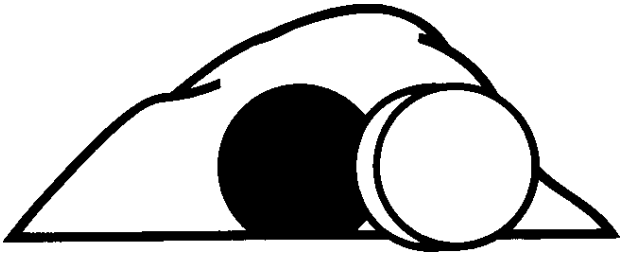

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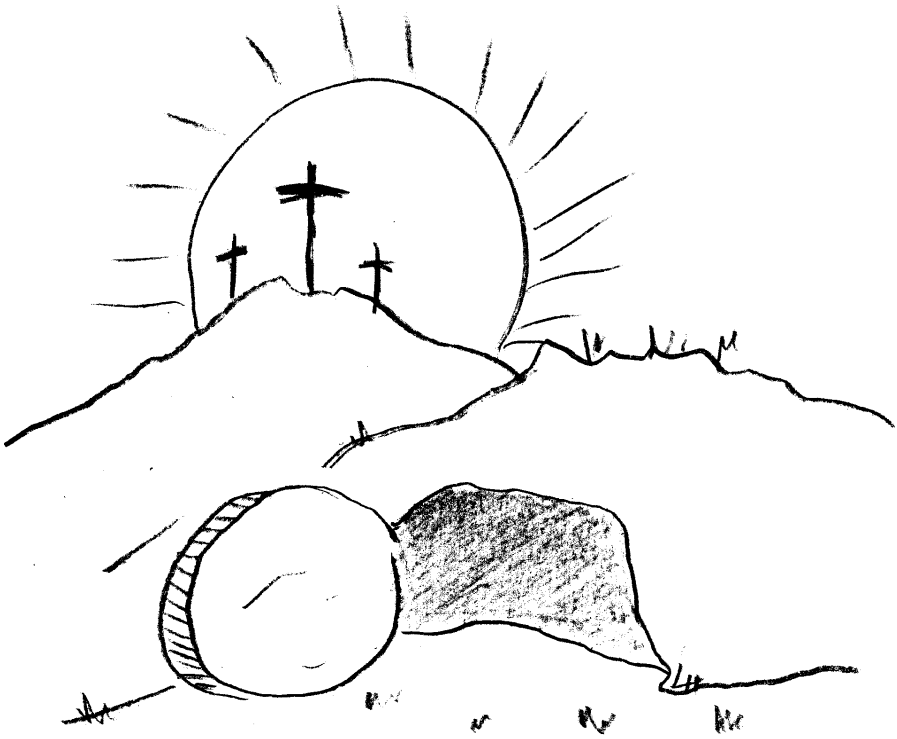


Introduction

Easter is a time of the year when, for Christians, the full gamut of emotions run riot.

From excitement of the triumphal ride into Jerusalem, the rush of last-minute stories from Jesus, the sternness of the command to love on Maundy Thursday, the grey clouds of depression over a Friday that seems anything but ‘Good’, to a very slow dark Saturday of waiting, to a buoyant and uplifting Resurrection Sunday, Holy Week may contain a roller coaster of emotions.

For others it is simply a public holiday on the calendar.

But we cannot sincerely read the gospel accounts moving through Passion Week without it moving us.

The purpose of these seven inspiring messages is to enable us to joyously ride the waves of these emotions having an endless hope rather than a hopeless end.

Each chapter begins with a pericope (a passage of Scripture to be read aloud) and ends with a prayer for the reader to pray.

— Lionel Hartley, 2022

Chapter 1: Two Weeks

Pericope

Isaiah 53:7, “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.”

and Luke 23:44-46, “And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour.

45) And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst.

46) And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.”

The two greatest events in all history are the creation of the world and the redemption of the world.

Each of these events involved a great divine week of work and a day of rest. Foundation Week accomplished the work of man's creation, and the week that is called Holy Week or Passion Week (perhaps a better term would be Redemption Week) accomplished the work of man's salvation.

An anonymous writer wrote a few rhyming couplets on Foundation Week. If I had written such poetry, I'd like to remain anonymous too. However, it does have a message. Here it is:

Day one brought heaven earth and light. It must have been so very bright!
Day two God made the clear blue sky, a place for many birds to fly.
Day three brought land apart from sea with all the plants and grass and trees.
Day four shone forth moon and stars and sun. The work of God was not yet done.
Day five we see the fish and birds. God did this with just His words.
Day six God formed all beasts and man, to

finish His creation plan.
Day seven was especially blessed, a day for worship and for rest.

Foundation Week, which culminated in a perfect world, was followed by man's fall and God's Curse on the world. Redemption Week, which culminated in the death and burial of the maker of that perfect world, is followed by man's restoration and the ultimate removal of God's Curse from the world.

A tree was the medium of man's temptation and sin; another tree was the medium of man's forgiveness and deliverance.

It is fascinating to compare the events of the seven days of Foundation Week and Redemption Week, respectively. Popular songs call God's handiwork *awesome*. A word that has its roots in the phrase '*some awe*'.

But I would suggest the Old English Word '*awful*', meaning filled with awe or inspired by a feeling of fearful wonderment and reverence, would be a better descriptor.

Nowadays the adjective '*awful*' has an additional meaning and that is 'something exceptionally bad'.

So Foundation week was marvellously awful (awe-full) while Redemption week atrociously awful.

The chronology of the events of Redemption Week has been the subject of much disagreement among scholars, and it is not possible to be certain on a number of the details.

What I will share with you today is not meant to be dogmatic, but to give us even more cause to praise God our creator and redeemer.

I feel more confident in sharing this because the same Jesus, our Redeemer, was also our creator. John Chapter 1 is talking about Jesus, calling him The Word (we know that from verse 13).

John Chapter 1 begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made."

I suggest that he is called The Word, because

that was the tool that He used to create. For example, Genesis 1:3 says, “And God *said*, Let there be light: and there was light.”

Let’s read some of Genesis 1, beginning at the first verse - In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good…

Prior to the creation of this world, this planet consisted of basic elements only, with no structure and no occupant, a static suspension in a pervasive, watery matrix according to 2 Peter 3:5. When God’s Spirit began to move over this watery mass, the waters and their rocky suspensions coalesced into this great spherical planet and, at the centre of the electromagnetic spectrum of forces, visible light was generated.

Zechariah 9:9 says, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and

having Redemption; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass".

Compare this with Matthew 21:1

And when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and were come to Bethphage, unto the mount of Olives, then sent Jesus two disciples,

Saying unto them, Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto me.

And verse 6: And the disciples went, and did as Jesus commanded them,

And brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their clothes, and they set him thereon.

And a very great multitude spread their garments in the way; others cut down branches from the trees, and strowed them in the way.

And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest.

In a beautiful analogy, on the first day of Redemption Week, the Creator King of the universe entered His chosen capital city to begin His work of redemption, as He had long ago entered His universe to begin His work of creation.

Luke 19:39 tells us that some of the Pharisees from among the multitude asked Jesus to rebuke his disciples. In verse 40 it tells us that Jesus replied that if the multitude should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out.

You see, even the very elements He had created would have acknowledged His authority, though the human leaders of His people would not.

Let's look at the second day. Having activated the earth, God next provided for it a marvellous atmosphere and hydrosphere in which, later, would live the birds and fish. No other planet that we know of is equipped with air and water in such abundance, and this is strong evidence that the earth was uniquely planned for man and animal life.

The hydrosphere was further divided into waters below and waters above "the firmament." The Hebrew word for firmament means, literally

"stretched-out space". The waters above the firmament probably comprised a vast blanket of transparent water vapour, maintaining a perfect climate worldwide, with ideal conditions for longevity.

Paralleling the primeval provision of life-sustaining air and water, on the second day of Redemption Week, He entered again into the city (having spent the night in Bethany) and taught in the temple. As He approached the city according to Mark's version in Mark 11:12-19, He cursed a barren fig tree and then, in the temple Jesus overthrew the tables of the money changers. The parallel accounts in Matthew and Luke indicate that this was either the second time or this was on the first day.

Either way, both actions - the cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple - symbolize the purging of that which is barren in the Creator's kingdom. He had created a world prepared for life (air as the breath of life and water as the medium of life), but mankind, even the very teachers of His chosen people, had made it unfruitful and impure.

As physical life must first have a world of pure air and water, so the preparations for a world of true

spiritual life require the purifying breath of the Spirit and the cleansing water of the Word, preparing for the true fruit of the Spirit and the true temple of God's presence, in the age to come.

Let's read Mark 11:20-24, "And in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots.

And Peter calling to remembrance saith unto him, Master, behold, the fig tree which thou cursedst is withered away.

And Jesus answering saith unto them, Have faith in God.

For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith.

Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them.

On the third day, the next day, Scripture tells us, the sight of the withered fig tree led to an

instructive lesson on faith in God, the Lord Jesus assuring the disciples that real faith could move mountains into the sea. In parallel, on the third day of creation, God had literally called mountains up out of the sea.

Genesis 1:9,10 tell us, “And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so. And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that it was good.”

It was also on this third day that the Lord had the most abrasive of all His confrontations with the Pharisees and Sadducees. He spoke many things against them and they were actively conspiring to destroy Him.

It is appropriate that His challenges to them on this day began with two parables dealing with a vineyard in which He reminded them that they had been called to be in charge of God’s vineyard on the earth, and had failed. Like the fig tree, there was no fruit for God from their service, and therefore, they would soon be removed from their stewardship.

Likewise on the third day of Foundation Week the entire earth was prepared as a beautiful garden, with an abundance of fruit to nourish every living creature (Genesis 1:11,12) and it had later been placed in man's care, but mankind in general, and the chosen people in particular, had failed in their mission.

Before the earth could be redeemed and made a beautiful garden again it must be purged and the faithless keepers of the vineyard replaced. Revelation 22:2 tells us, "In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations."

This third day of Passion Week was climaxed with the great Sermon on the Mount of Olives in which the Lord promised His disciples that, though Jerusalem must first be destroyed, He would come again in power and great glory, to establish His kingdom in a new Jerusalem.

It was appropriate that He should then spend the night following that third day, with the handful of disciples who were still faithful to Him, on the Mount of Olives according to Luke 21:37, for the Mount

would call to memory that far-off third day of Foundation Week when He had drawn all the mountains out of the sea.

Also, the Garden of Gethsemane on its slopes, with its little grove of vines and fruit trees, would bring to mind the beautiful Garden of Eden and the verdant world He had planted everywhere on the dry land on that same third day. Because of what He was now about to accomplish at Jerusalem, the ground would one day be cleansed of its Curse, and all would be made new again.

On the fourth day of Foundation Week, the Lord Jesus had formed the sun and the moon and all the stars of heaven. There had been "light" on the first three days, but now there were actual lights! Not only would the earth and its verdure be a source of beauty and sustenance to man, but even the very heavens would bring joy and inspiration to him. Furthermore, they would guide his way and keep his time.

But instead of the stars of heaven turning man's thoughts and affections toward His Creator, their significance was corrupted and identified with a host of false gods and goddesses.

At age 19, Abraham Lincoln, later to become the 16th President of the United States wrote, “I can see how it might be possible for a man to look down upon the earth and be an atheist, but I cannot conceive how he could look up in to the heavens and say there is no God. I never behold the stars that I do not feel that I am looking in the face of God.” Someone has said, “Peace is seeing a sunset & knowing who to thank”.

Furthermore, instead of creating a sense of awe and reverence for the majesty of the One who could fill all heavens, many have bolstered man’s belief that the earth is insignificant and meaningless in such a vast, evolving cosmos. Perhaps thoughts such as these troubled the mind of the Lord that night as He lay on the mountain gazing at the lights He had long ago made for the darkness.

When morning came, He returned to Jerusalem, where many were waiting to hear Him. He taught in the temple but, frustratingly, the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) do not record His teachings.

This lack, however is possibly supplied in the apparently parenthetical record of a portion of His

temple teachings as given only in the fourth gospel, in John 12:20-50 because there the Lord twice compared Himself to the Light He had made: “I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth in me should not abide in darkness.”

“Yet a little while is the light with you. Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you; for he that walketh in darkness knoweth not whither he goeth” (John 12:46, 35).

He who was the true Light must become darkness, in order that, in the new world, there would never be night again.

And now the fifth day. There is little information given in the gospels about the fifth day of Redemption Week. When there were yet “two days until the Passover” (Mark 14:1), right after the bitter confrontation with the scribes and chief priests on the third day, the latter began actively seeking a means to trap and execute Jesus, though they feared to do it on the day on which the Passover Feast was to be observed (Mark 14:2).

It was either on the fourth day or more likely on this fifth day, which was the feast day, that Judas

went to them with his offer to betray Jesus. He had apparently been seriously thinking about this action ever since the night when the Lord had rebuked him for his cupidity.

This had been in the home in Bethany, on the night of the Sabbath, just before the day when Christ entered Jerusalem riding on the donkey according to John 12:1-8.

Although this was the same supper described in Matthew 26 and in Mark, it is inserted parenthetically after the sermon on the Mount of Olives in order to stress the direct causal relation of this supper to Judas' decision to betray his Master.

Read with me Mark 14:12. And the first day of unleavened bread, when they killed the passover, his disciples said unto him, Where wilt thou that we go and prepare that thou mayest eat the passover?

And he sendeth forth two of his disciples, and saith unto them, Go ye into the city, and there shall meet you a man bearing a pitcher of water: follow him.

And wheresoever he shall go in, say ye to the

goodman of the house, The Master saith, Where is the guestchamber, where I shall eat the passover with my disciples?

And he will show you a large upper room furnished and prepared: there make ready for us.

And his disciples went forth, and came into the city, and found as he had said unto them: and they made ready the passover.

And in the evening he cometh with the twelve.

On this the fifth day, the day of the Passover, the Lord Jesus instructed two of His disciples to make preparations for their own observance of the feast that night. So far as the record goes; this is all that we know of His words during that day, though there is no doubt that He was teaching in the temple on this day as well.

Perhaps this strange silence in the record for this fifth day is for the purpose of emphasizing the greater importance of these preparations for the Passover.

The fact that John in John 19:14 indicates the preparation day to have been the following day is

probably best understood in terms of the fact that, at that time, the Galileans are known to have observed the Passover on one day and the Judeans on the following day.

Multitudes of sacrificial lambs and other animals had been slain and their blood spilled through the centuries, but this would be the last such acceptable sacrifice. On the morrow, the Lamb of God would take away the sins of the world. He would offer one sacrifice for sins forever.

As the Lord thought about the shedding of the blood of that last Passover lamb on that Fifth Day of Holy Week, I just wonder if He may also have thought of the fifth day of Foundation Week, when He had first created animal life.

This had been His second great act of creation, when He created the entity of conscious animal life (the first had been the creation of the physical elements, recorded in Genesis 1:1). In these living animals, the "life" of the flesh was in their blood, and it was the blood which would later be accepted as an atonement for sin (Leviticus 17:11).

Note that the words "creature," "soul," and

"life" all are translations of the same Hebrew word *nephesh*. Surely the shedding of the innocent blood of the lamb that day would recall the far-off day when the "life" in that blood had been created.

And because He, the Lamb of God, was about to become our Passover, death itself would soon be swallowed up in victory.

Now we come to the sixth day. On the sixth day of creation, man had been created in the image and likeness of God, the very climax and goal of God's great work of creation (Genesis 1:26, 27). On this sixth day of Redemption Week, God proved to the world that was made in the likeness of man in order to finish the even greater work of redemption.

Under the great Curse, the whole creation had long been groaning and travailing in pain. But now the Creator, Himself, had been made the curse, and it seemed as though the Creation also must die. Though He had made heaven and earth on the First Day, now He was lifted up from the earth and the heavens were silent. Though He had made the waters on the Second Day, He who was the very Water of Life, was dying of thirst.

On the Third Day He had made the dry land, but now the "earth did quake and the rocks were rent" because Satan's rod had struck at the Rock of Redemption and out flowed the liquids of life. God had also covered the earth with trees and vines on that third day, but now the True Vine had been plucked up and Luke 23 tells us the green tree was cut down.

He had made the sun on the Fourth Day, but now the sun was darkened and the Light of the World was burning out.

On the Fifth Day He had created life, and He Himself was Life, but now the life of His flesh, the precious blood, was being poured out on the ground beneath the cross.

On the Sixth Day He had created man and given him life, but now man had despised the love of God and lifted up the Son of Man to death.

But that is not the end of the story, and all was proceeding according to "the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God". "On the seventh day God ended His work which He had made" (Genesis 1:21). Furthermore, "everything that He had made was very good" (Genesis 1:31). God's majestic work of

Creation was complete and perfect in every detail. And so is His work of Redemption. This is especially emphasized in John's account.

Read with me John 19 verse 28, "After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, saith, "I thirst…"

And verse 30, "When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, He said, it is finished; and He bowed His head, and gave up the ghost"

Jesus had finished all the things He had to do, and then He finished the last of the prophetic scriptures that must be carried out. Then, and only then, was the work of redemption completed and the price of reconciliation fully paid, so that He could finally shout the great victory cry, "It is finished."

The record of Creation stresses repeatedly that the entire work of the creation and making of all things had been finished (Genesis 2:1-3). In like manner John's record stresses repeatedly the finished work of Christ on the cross.

Furthermore, as the finished creation was "very good," so is our finished Redemption. Hebrews 2:3

and 5:9 tells us that the Redemption which Christ thus provided on the cross is “so great” and “eternal”, and 2 Thessalonians 2:13 adds that the hope thereof is “good”.

In April 2011 I read a sign outside St Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Murwillumbah, NSW. It said, *“Want to get to heaven? Jesus says, ‘Only over my dead body!’”*

Then, finally, having finished the work of redemption, Christ rested on the seventh day, His body sleeping in death in Joseph’s tomb. He had died quickly, and the preparations for burial had been hurried so that He could be buried before the Sabbath (sunset). As He had rested after finishing His work of Creation, so now He rested once again.

On the first day of the new week, He would rise again, as He had said. He referred to this as the third day because His body rested in the tomb all the Sabbath Day, plus part of the previous and following days, according to Hebrew idiomatic usage, *“three days and three nights”*. But death could hold Him no longer. He arose from the dead, and is now alive forevermore.

The Gospels do not explain the Resurrection; the Resurrection explains the Gospels. Theologian John Stott put it this way: “We live and die; Christ died and lives”.

Foundation week gave *this world* meaning and significance, filled it with light and life. Redemption Week shows us a God who came down from heaven to give *us* meaning and significance, and fill us with light and life.

God’s creativity did not end with Foundation week and the work of redemption did not end with Redemption week, but just as He loved, sought after and clothed sinful Adam and Eve with garments of sacrifice, even so following the awful Redemption week there was a resurrection and a living Christ loves and seeks after us and clothes us with His righteous garment of sacrifice.

The philosopher Dag Hammarskjold said, “For all that has been, thanks; to all that will be, yes.”

Won’t you accept this gift from the Creator Himself?

A Prayer for the Reader:

Thank you Lord, our creator, for not leaving this world to suffer the final punishment for sin, but You came and during one awful week endured the pain and suffered the shame even the death on a cross.

Thank you that you love us, seek us and clothe us for eternity. In Jesus' Name, Amen

Chapter 2: Victor or Victim?

Pericope:

Luke 24:1-6a “Now upon the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came unto the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared, and certain others with them. And they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre. And they entered in, and found not the body of the Lord Jesus. And it came to pass, as they were much perplexed thereabout, behold, two men stood by them in shining garments: And as they were afraid, and bowed down their faces to the earth, they said unto them, Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen…”

By way of introduction we are reading 1 Corinthians 15:19-26, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead."

"For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming. Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death."

Several hundred years before the birth of Jesus, a crucial battle occurred between the Greeks and the Persians upon the plains of Marathon. The battle raged for hours. In many respects it was a fight to the finish. Finally the numerically inferior Greeks, the underdogs, managed a tremendous tactical win, but there was a problem. Soon the Senate, many miles away in Athens, was to vote and would most certainly ratify a treaty of appeasement. In desperation they

sent a runner in full battle gear to go the twenty-seven miles to tell of the news. By the time the young boy got to Athens he had run a Marathon. It is said he was totally spent, that he literally ran himself to death. In his exhaustion he was able to utter only one word to the Athenians: “Victory.”

Easter is all about that one word: victory.

One Easter I asked my young son David what Easter meant to him and he said, “An empty tomb”.

I applaud his answer, however there is much more to it than that, because THE empty tomb is not just any tomb. There is an empty tomb in Egypt that dates back to the fourteenth century B.C. It is an elaborate tomb that was prepared for King Tutenkhamen’s military leader Horemheb, but he was never buried there. Four years after King Tutenkhamen died, Horemheb became the pharaoh and was later buried in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes.

The Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian 1st planned for himself a colossal mausoleum to be erected in Innsbruck, Austria. He once said, “The man who makes no memory of himself in his lifetime will

enjoy no memory after his death and will be forgotten as soon as the bells cease to toll." The tomb in Innsbruck was not completed until sixty-three years after his death and remains an empty tomb; and Maximilian is buried in Wiener Neustadt, 530 kilometres away in eastern Austria.

The Etruscans were the first known inhabitants of Italy. They were there before the Romans and had a highly developed civilization. They left no written record, no history, no poetry, and no literature. All that we know of them we have learned from their tombs. Grave robbers have stripped these tombs bare. There are many empty Etruscan tombs.

One April, a certain Sunday school teacher asked all eight children in her class to hide within an empty film container a small object that represented life in the spring.

Not wanting to embarrass eight-year-old Stephen, whose mental retardation was becoming more manifest, the teacher suggested that the children all place their unlabeled containers on her desk. Since she feared that Stephen might not have caught on, she decided that she should open them.

The first had a tiny flower. “What a lovely sign of new life!” “I brought that one!” the donor exclaimed. Next came a rock. “That must be Stephen’s,” the teacher thought, since rocks do not symbolize new life. But Billy shouted that his rock had moss on it, and moss was new life. The teacher agreed.

A butterfly flew from the third container, and another child bragged that her choice was best of all.

The fourth container was empty. “That has to be Stephen’s,” thought the teacher, quickly reaching for the fifth.

“Please, don’t skip mine!’ Stephen interjected. “But it’s empty.” “That’s right,” said Stephen. “The tomb was empty, and that is new life for everyone.”

Later that summer, Stephen’s condition grew worse, and he died. On his casket at the funeral, mourners found eight little containers. They were all empty.

For me the victory of Easter is not an empty tomb but a risen Saviour.

Musical duo William and Gloria Gaither wrote,

“Because he lives I can face tomorrow; because he lives all fear is gone. Because I know he holds the future, and life is worth the living just because he lives.”

1n 1939, two years before his death, music teacher and magazine editor Eugene Bartlett wrote these words:

> *“I heard an old, old story, how a Saviour came from glory, how He gave His life on Calvary to save a wretch like me; I heard about His groaning, of His precious blood’s atoning, then I repented of my sins and won the victory.”*
>
> *“I heard about His healing, of His cleansing power revealing. How He made the lame to walk again and caused the blind to see; and then I cried, “Dear Jesus, come and heal my broken spirit,” and somehow Jesus came and brought to me the victory.”*
>
> *“I heard about a mansion He has built for me in glory. and I heard about the streets of gold beyond the crystal sea; about the angels singing, and the old redemption story, and*

some sweet day I'll sing up there the song of victory."

"O victory in Jesus, my Saviour, forever. He sought me and bought me with His redeeming blood; He loved me ere I knew Him and all my love is due Him, He plunged me to victory, beneath the cleansing flood."

On Saturday 17th August, 2002, suspected Basque terrorist Ismael Berasategui Escudero escaped from the high security La Sante prison in Paris.

He swapped places with his brother and it took embarrassed staff five days to discover the escape.

On Friday on the first Easter, Barabbas was on death row, condemned to die. Your Elder Brother and mine swapped places with him and was crucified instead.

It took three days for the disciples to discover his death sentence had really been revoked. It has taken two thousand years since then and still many have not discovered Him.

Greg Scharf wrote, "In the spring of 1991, even

before the brief coup in August, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev found his authority and leadership tested on all sides. From Baltic states declaring their independence, to conservatives clamouring for a return to old-line communism, to progressives pushing for more economic reforms, the Soviet Union was a nation on the brink."

"Things were coming to a head when demonstrators planned a massive march on Thursday, March 28 in Moscow itself to show their opposition to government policy, hoping that 500,000 people would participate.

The Kremlin banned demonstrations, issued dire warnings against protesters, and promised a massive show of force if the ban was defied. On everyone's mind was the peaceful January demonstration in Lithuania that was crushed by Soviet tanks and troops, in the process killing 14 people."

"On the day of the march 50,000 troops and police crowded Moscow; 100,000 people ignored the ban and marched. Fortunately there were no clashes, but, commentating on short-wave radio, a BBC correspondent described Gorbachev's show of force as "a display of strength that showed considerable

weakness."

The following day Christians worldwide celebrated Good Friday, the day when Christ voluntarily went to the cross and allowed his own creation to torture and kill him. A display of weakness that showed considerable strength."

But the message of Easter does not end there…

One evening in 1874, Pastor Robert Lowry was reading again the account of Christ's resurrection found in Luke 24, in our Scripture reading for today, where it says, "He is not here, but is risen."

Soon, Lowry found himself at the pump organ in the parlour of his home; and in a matter of minutes, the good pastor had completed the words and the music of a new hymn. I have at home a scratchy 1921 recording of it by Henry Burr and the Peerless Quartet.

When I first heard it, I laughed. I confess that at first I did not listen to the words, but was intrigued by the metrical pattern in the melody. The verses are sung very solemnly in five-part harmony and the refrain in unison is in contrast, both upbeat and joyous.

As they sang on, I began to listen to the words

and it was strangely moving.

Here is what they sang:

"Low in the grave He lay, Jesus my Saviour,
waiting the coming day, Jesus my Lord!
Vainly they watch His bed, Jesus my Saviour;
vainly they seal the dead, Jesus my Lord!
Death cannot keep its Prey, Jesus my Saviour; He tore the bars away, Jesus my Lord!

And the refrain:

Up from the grave He arose, with a mighty triumph o'er His foes, He arose a Victor from the dark domain, and He lives forever, with His saints to reign.
He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!"

Easter is all about that one word: victory. Because what death did to Jesus is nothing compared to what Jesus did to death.

"Dear Rob," begins the hand-scrawled letter addressed to young Rob Mouw, "I read Bob Greene's

wonderful column about you. I love sports and true sportsmen. My faith in our future was renewed and lifted by that column. Never lose your principles. Always stand for what's decent and right. That's what you told us all when you refused the victory!" The signature: former President George Bush.

Soccer player Rob Mouw, a senior at Wheaton (Illinois) Christian High School, isn't used to publicity, much less letters from former presidents. But his unusual action in a hotly contested soccer match was reported by local newspapers, and then by nationally syndicated columnist Bob Greene.

In the closing seconds of a game against Waubonsie Valley, a team ranked high in the state, Mouw managed a breakaway and kicked the tying goal. With Wheaton fans cheering the upset and Waubonsie fans protesting the goal was late, Mouw walked to the referee and asked whether the official time was kept on the scoreboard or the referee's stopwatch.

The scoreboard time was official, he was told. Mouw then explained that just before his kick, he had seen zeros on the scoreboard clock. Since he hadn't heard a whistle, he kept playing. But his goal was

late, and he didn't think it should count. The referee reversed his call, awarding the game to Waubonsie.

That night, Mouw went home to his homework. "I didn't think much about it," he says. "I hadn't done anything that great. For me, acting honestly was just a reflection of Christ in me."

Bob Greene opened his column with: "If you're sick of the direction sports in this country have been taking — from the preening and taunting of Deion Sanders and his many followers, to the tiresome bickering between millionaire professional athletes and the millionaire owners of their teams — then here's a sports story for you."

And he ended by quoting Mouw: "'Every time in your life you have an opportunity to do right, you should be thankful. For a person to know what right is, and then not to do it — that would be a sin. To have won the game — I mean, really, who cares? Doing the right thing is more important. It lets you have peace.'"

As a footnote, Rob went on to play soccer for Wheaton College, helping the team to a national championship in a subsequent year.

Read with me please, 1 Corinthians 15:51-57, Behold, I show you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,

52) In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

53) For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

54) So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

55) O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?

56) The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law.

57) But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

An American admiral had a small card printed and circulated among his subordinates and workers.

On it in grey type was this background: “It Can’t Be Done,” and then, in bold black type across this was printed, “But Here It Is.”

As we look at sin and realize its strength, defeat would seem to be inevitable were it not for Christ. “But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The phrase “which giveth us” is a present participle (*didonti*) in Greek. A better translation would be “who keeps on giving us.” This is not just one victory that God gives us but a constant experience of victory through Christ.

Napoleon said, “Battles are won, not by men, but by a man.” He was right in more ways than one. Victories are won, not by Christians but by Christ. It is our privilege and joy to share in His victory.

Like the small boy who jumped up and down shouting “We’ve won, we’ve won!” at a football game-though he was not a member of the team or of the school represented by the team, we too can rejoice in a victory with which we associate ourselves.

We can live in joy and triumph. We can shout,

“We’ve won!” over the victory that was accomplished by our Lord Jesus Christ on Calvary over 2,000 years ago.

In Newcastle, in New South Wales, is a museum exhibit with a wall clock on display that has hands that do not move.

This is because the clock stopped at 10:27am, precisely the moment a 5.5 magnitude earthquake rocked the city on December 28th 1989, with 160 people injured and causing 13 fatalities.

The clock has been on display ever since as symbol of death.

In the Austrian town of Waidhofen an der Ybbs, there is an impressive clock tower with a clock that doesn’t also does not run.

The tower was built in 1542 to commemorate the successful repulsion of a Turkish invasion, and the clock has been stopped at 11:45 a.m., the exact time of the victory.

It seems that for many believers time stops at Easter, the day of Christ’s victory and ours!

It was June 18, 1815, at the Battle of Waterloo. The French under the command of Napoleon were fighting the Allies (British, Dutch, and Germans) under the command of Wellington.

The people of England depended on a system of semaphore signals to find out how the battle was going. One of these signal stations was on the tower of Winchester Cathedral.

Late in the day it flashed the signal: "Wellington defeated…." Just at that moment one of those sudden English fog clouds made it impossible to read the message. The news of defeat quickly spread throughout the city. The whole countryside was sad and gloomy when they heard the news that their country had lost the war.

Suddenly the fog lifted, and the remainder of the message could be read. The message had four words, not two. The complete message was: "Wellington defeated the enemy" It took only a few minutes for the good news to spread. Sorrow was turned into joy, defeat was turned into victory!

So it was when Jesus was laid in the tomb on the first Good Friday afternoon. Hope had died even

in the hearts of Jesus' most loyal friends. After the frightful crucifixion, the fog of disappointment and misunderstanding had crept in on the friends of Jesus. They had "read" only part of the divine message. "Christ defeated" was all that they knew.

But then on the third day — Easter Sunday — the fog of disappointment and misunderstanding lifted, and the world received the complete message: "Christ defeated the enemy, death!" Defeat was turned into victory; death was turned to life!

R. Geoffrey Brown said, "Some will tell you that triumph will come by the development of human beings — the gradual evolution of their potentialities. We should just give it time, wait and see. Everything's coming up roses. World War I dealt that theory the cutting blow. World War II broke its spirit. Vietnam laid it in its grave. The takeovers of Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan shovelled the dirt of interment on it."

"Will human progress stop people and nations from sinning? Will human progress and achievement ever wipe away all tears from our eyes or heal our broken hearts? To ask these questions is to answer them."

“No, the final victory will not come through some natural progress of human development, nor through the religious forces that are operative in the world right now. The victory will come not by an improvement of the present order but through its complete overthrow and supercession.”

“The high point of human history will be the sudden appearance on the field of battle of the captain of our salvation. And he will come in glory, and it will be comparable to what John beheld: Look, I see a great white horse. And there is a rider on that horse whose name is Faithful and True, and there are many crowns upon his head.”

The last battle of the American Revolution was the Battle of Blue Licks, fought at the stream that bears that name. It was a battle that should never have been fought, for it was fought after the war was over! News travelled slowly in those days. Blue Licks is in Kentucky, and there was no means of quick communication over the Appalachian Mountains. No one knew the war was over.

In a sense, Christ won the victory over evil at Calvary. All that is left for us to do is tell the good news. Who are we going to tell?

In Ashtabula, Ohio, in 1876, a train went off the tracks and over the bridge, and many people were killed. One of those who died was Reverend Philip P. Bliss, a hymn writer and great evangelist. One of his most famous hymns was “Hold the Fort.” It was written after the occasion when Atlanta had been besieged and General Hood, for the Southern armies, came up and tried to draw away Sherman’s army.

Hood wasn’t successful, but he did have a couple of victories. One of them was at Alatoona Pass, where he attacked. At that point Sherman was on Kennesaw Mountain, a distance away. He looked down and could see that they were losing it. So Sherman, using a mirror and the sun’s rays, heliographed to his beleaguered troops, “Hold the fort, I am coming.’’

Major Whittle, a member of Sherman’s army, later recounted the tale to Bliss, who used it as the inspiration for the famous hymn: ‘Hold the fort, for I am coming,’ Jesus signals still. Wave the answer back to heaven, ‘By thy grace we will.’

One of the hymns of Philip P. Bliss is ‘I Will Sing of My Redeemer’

Contemplate these words:
I will sing of my Redeemer, and His wondrous love to me. On the cruel cross He suffered; from the curse to set me free. Sing, Oh, sing of my Redeemer, with His blood He purchased me; on the cross He sealed my pardon; paid the debt and made me free.

I will tell the wondrous story, how my lost estate to save, in His boundless love and mercy, He the ransom freely gave. Sing, Oh, sing of my Redeemer, with His blood He purchased me; on the cross He sealed my pardon; paid the debt and made me free.

I will sing of my Redeemer, and His heav'nly love to me; He from death to life hath brought me, Son of God, with Him to be. Sing, Oh, sing of my Redeemer, with His blood He purchased me; on the cross He sealed my pardon; paid the debt and made me free.

A Prayer for the Reader:

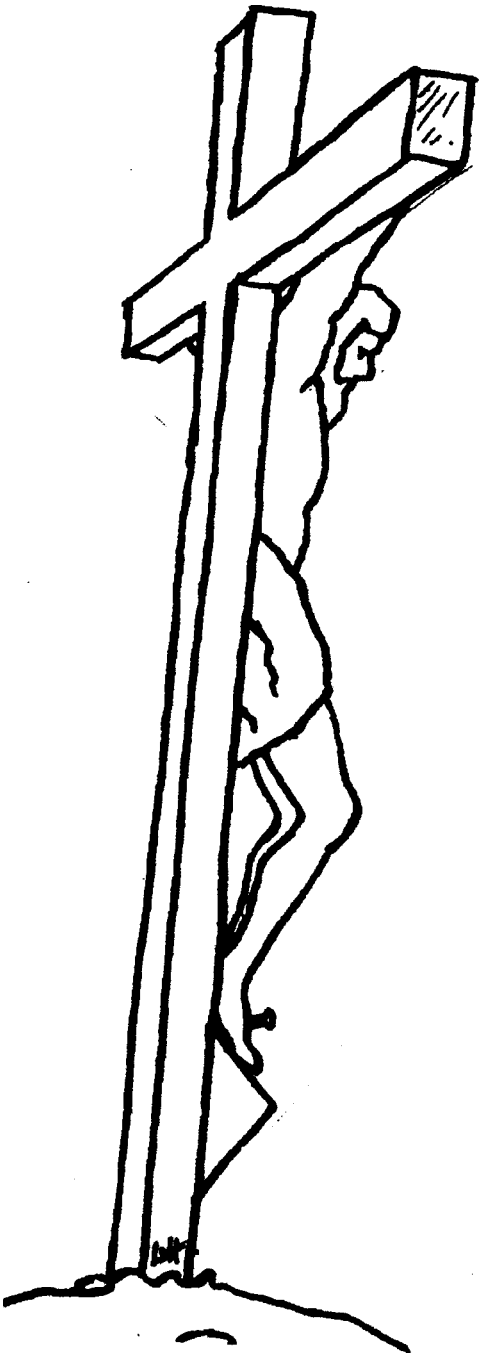
May the love of God the Father surround you as you go out from this place, and return to your daily life.

May Jesus Christ always stand before you with an invitation to know him and to follow him, confident that He is alive, He is risen.

May the Holy Spirit give you comfort, wisdom and grace for the journey, and kindle your imagination;

And may the love of a community of believers be like a warm cloak to shield you from despair and keep you strong in hope until we meet again.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.



Chapter 3: Good Friday

Pericope

> Matthew 27:35, "And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots."

Friday is the day that the Scriptures call the Preparation Day (so named as it is the day when God's people prepare for the Sabbath, the highlight of the week).

Good Friday is named from the German *'Gottes Freitag'* meaning God's Friday. Reading the Gospel accounts of what took place that awful day at the pivot of history, we can see little that is good in that Friday but we sure can see God. It was the day

that God demonstrated His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8, "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.")

We read in John 13:34 that on the night before Good Friday during that last supper He gave His disciples a new commandment.

The old commandment mandated that we love our neighbours as ourselves, but the way we treat our bodies through what we eat, read, listen to, watch and meditate on, suggests that we don't love ourselves very appropriately.

So a new commandment was needed, that we love sacrificially as Jesus loved us.

The day before Good Friday is customarily known as Maundy Thursday, in recognition of Jesus' new commandment for us to love one another in this unconditional way. The word Maundy from the Latin word for command.

So on Thursday of Easter week He commanded us to love as He loves and then on God's Friday he demonstrated that love to us, with the greatest

practical confirmation of love the universe has ever seen.

Permit me, please to quote from Scripture one specific event of that day.

The Liturgist Mick Scotchmer notes that Pilate had been outside questioning the Jews regarding Jesus, and we pick up the story as he returns to the Judgement Hall.

John 18:33-38 - “Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ Jesus answered, ‘Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?’

Pilate replied, ‘I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?’

Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.’

Pilate asked him. ‘So you are a king?’

Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.’

Pilate asked him, ‘What is truth?’”

No, he wasn’t trying to be clever, he really meant it, for he’d encountered so many over the years who were convinced they had the answer, each swearing blind that they knew best, that they were party to some special knowledge denied to others.

They couldn’t all be right, could they? And, the way Pilate saw it, none of them were. Some were downright crazy, others well-intentioned but misguided, a possibly a few with genuine insights to offer, but not one of them had the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Life just isn’t like that — black and white — and Pilate would have thought that anyone who thinks otherwise is potentially dangerous, all the makings of a dictator or fanatic.

So when this Jesus fellow trotted out the same old refrain we can understand Pilate being sceptical.

Quite simply, he'd seen it all before.

Or at least, that's what Pilate thought; only it soon became apparent that there was more to this man than met the eye, something quite out of the ordinary. He'd expected him to launch straightaway into some diatribe, to tell Pilate, as they always do, why he was right and Pilate was wrong. But he didn't.

He just looked at Pilate with an expression that left Pilate mystified, unlike anything he'd seen before. None of the usual cocktail of fear and bravado, laced with a liberal dash of resentment — not even the remotest suggestion of it.

Instead there was what seemed like pity, concern, even compassion, as though he was genuinely disappointed that Pilate didn't understand, as though he longed for Pilate's eyes to be opened, as though he actually cared about the way Pilate responded.

It threw Pilate completely; after all, Pilate was the one conducting the trial, not him. It was as though it was really Pilate's life being weighed there in the balance, and found sadly wanting.

So he asked “What is truth?” although he saw it there that day in the eyes of that man; the knowledge that for the first time in Pilate’s life he had the chance to make a stand, to commit himself to something which really mattered, but he let it slip through his fingers for fear of the consequences.

When Pilate held the difference between life and death in his hands that day, he held Jesus’ fate in his hands as well as his own, and Pilate decided finally on death.

Often when I have read the gospel narrative I personally ponder whether it is Jesus on trial or me?

We can find answer to this in a Stuart Townend’s contemporary hymn and I invite you to reflect on these words:

How deep the Father’s love for us
How vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure.
How great the pain of searing loss
The Father turns His face away
As wounds which mar the Chosen One
Bring many sons to glory.

Behold the man upon a cross,
My sin upon His shoulders,
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers.
It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished;
His dying breath has brought me life
I know that it is finished.

I will not boast in anything:
No gifts, no power, no wisdom,
But I will boast in Jesus Christ,
His death and resurrection.
Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer,
But this I know with all my heart
His wounds have paid my ransom.

The longest night gives way to morning as Jesus, beaten beyond recognition and bleeding from head to toe, staggers physically strength-less under the weight of his own cross towards the crucifixion site at Golgotha.

Moments later Jesus, nails driven through his wrists and feet, is raised up on his cross. On one of

the cruellest means of torture mankind has ever devised, the one labelled the King of the Jews is in agony. His crucifixion is a very public spectacle.

The same crowd who had been whipped into a "crucify him" frenzy by the religious leaders merely minutes before have now gathered around Jesus to continue their mocking.

One of the thieves crucified alongside Jesus joins in with the crowd as they insult and mock him for his inability to save himself. They do not realise that if this King saves himself their only hope for salvation is lost.

The other thief, however, sees Jesus for Whom He really is and receives the promise of life when he asks the Messiah to remember him.

As the sundial marks midday the skies above the land turning dark. Jesus, the Son of God is embracing the full wrath of his Father so that we might taste eternal life.

He has become sin for us, crying out in a loud voice of isolation, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

It is the single greatest display of love and surrendered obedience the world has ever seen and will ever see.

Shortly after, having drained the cup he prayed would pass him by, and having experienced the full curse of sin, Jesus willingly gives up his life in three words that inextricably weave our past, present and future together and still echo into eternity to this day: *"It is finished"*.

As Jesus commits his spirit into the hands of his Father and dies, the temple curtain is torn from top to bottom. What once separated us from God's holy presence is forever gone, overcome by grace.

For on this, the darkest day in history, our Saviour has made a way back to the Father for all humanity as he restored on the cross the mess sin unravelled in the garden. *"Surely this man was (and is) the Son of God!"*

In the 18th century, the U.S. Congress once issued a special edition of Thomas Jefferson's Bible. It was a simple copy of our Bible with all references to the supernatural eliminated. Jefferson, in selecting, had confined himself solely to the moral teachings of

Jesus. The closing words of Jefferson's Bible are in reference to the tomb: "There laid they Jesus and rolled a great stone at the mouth of the sepulchre and departed."

The Easter story in Jefferson's Bible ends on Good Friday. I would be negligent if I did the same without promising you that the Gospel narrative is followed by a glorious resurrection of Jesus from the dead. But that is a story for the next chapter..

A prayer for the reader:

Oh Lord, Good Friday, is a dark day, but it is the holiest of days. Your great sacrifice is more than we can comprehend. You chose the cross so we could be restored in relationship with you. Our sins put you there, but your love held you there.

Through Your suffering, our sins no longer separate us from Your goodness. Help us remember what this day means and may we live our lives accordingly. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Chapter 4: Resurrection, What Resurrection?

Pericope:

1 Corinthians 15:12-20 (KJV) Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?

13) But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen:

14) And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.

15) Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not.

16) For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised:

17) And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.

18) Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished.

19) If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.

20) But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first-fruits of them that slept.

The following story comes in several versions, and I'm not sure which is the most accurate, but here goes:

One April in USA, a Sunday school teacher asked all eight children in her class to hide within an empty container a small object that represented the resurrection.

Not wanting to embarrass eight-year-old Stephen, whose mental retardation was becoming more manifest, the teacher suggested that the children all place their unlabeled containers on her desk. Since she feared that Stephen might not have caught on, she decided that she should open them. The first had

a tiny flower. “What a lovely sign of new life!” “I brought that one!” the donor exclaimed. Next came a rock. “That must be Stephen’s,” the teacher thought, since rocks do not symbolize new life. But Billy shouted that his rock had moss on it, and moss was new life.

The teacher agreed.

A butterfly flew from the third container, and another child bragged that her choice was best of all.

The fourth container was empty. “That has to be Stephen’s,” thought the teacher, quickly reaching for the fifth.

“Please, don’t skip mine!’ Stephen interjected. “But it’s empty.” “That’s right,” said Stephen. “The tomb was empty, and that is new life for everyone.”

Later that summer, Stephen’s condition grew worse, and he died. On his casket at the funeral, mourners found eight containers. They were all empty.

Though infidels deny it, though the intellectual elite and liberal thinkers call it foolishness, the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is of vital importance. In fact, if there is one doctrine, one belief

that sets Christianity apart from all other religions and belief systems in the world, it is the doctrine of the bodily resurrection of it's founder from the dead.

The resurrection is the fundamental doctrine of Christianity. Everything we believe and hold sacred stands or falls on the fact of the resurrection.

If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then we are no better off than the worst sinner this morning! If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then the Bible is a lie and we have no hope! If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then we have no Gospel to preach and no saviour to preach about, we are of all men most miserable! If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then He Himself was guilty of deception.

In John 2: 19 Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

In John 10: 17-18 He said, "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. 18 No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father."

Five times He said that He would get up out of the tomb. Destroy the resurrection and Jesus is reduced to the status of being an ordinary man, He is no longer God.

In Romans 1:4 Paul wrote, “And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead:”

Destroy the resurrection and you have destroyed the reason for and possibility of our justification.

Romans 4:25, “Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.”

No wonder the Devil distorts the doctrine of the resurrection like no other. If he can convince us that Jesus is dead, then we will never believe unto salvation.

Perhaps this is why he had already put it into the minds of men to doubt the resurrection before it had ever happened. For example, the Sadducees in Mark 12:18, “Then come unto him the Sadducees, which say there is no resurrection.. .”

Even some in the church doubt whether or not

there was a resurrection.

For example, 1 Corinthians 15: 12, “Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?”

I thank God that I know, beyond any shadow of doubt, that the resurrection is a fact.

In 1874, hymn writer Robert Lowry wrote, “Up from the grave He arose, with a mighty triumph o’er His foes. He arose a victor from the dark domain and He lives forever with His saints to reign. He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!”

I want us to spend a few moments examining this glorious truth. Let’s look together at His resurrection and worship Him.

This chapter is divided into three parts: the prophecy of his resurrection, the eight proofs of his resurrection and the purpose of the resurrection.

The Prophecy of His Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:4, “And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the

scriptures”

The resurrection was not an event about which men knew nothing. It had been predicted before it took place. The Psalmist told about it - Psalms 16:10, “For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.”

Jesus told about it in Matthew 12:38-40; John 2:19; Mark 8:31.

(Matthew 12:38-40) “Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee.

39) But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas:

40) For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

(John 2:19) “Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

(Mark 8:31) “And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.”

The resurrection was visualised before it took place. The resurrection was pictured by Isaac. In Genesis 22, Isaac is seen with Abraham on the mount of sacrifice. The next time he is seen in the Bible, he is alive and well, claiming his bride. Jesus was seen on the mount of sacrifice. Resurrection morning he is seen, he is alive and well, claiming his bride, the Church.

The resurrection was visualised by the experience of Jonah, “Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights” (Jonah 1:17).

Matthew 12:38-40 - “Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee. 39 But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: 40 For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly;

so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

The prediction of the resurrection and the fulfilment of it, prove that Jesus is worthy to be followed and worshipped. One day a little girl proclaimed her faith as a Christian. A smart-alec nearby responded by saying, "Which Christ? Aren't there many?" Her answer was a classic. She said, "Sir, there are many pretenders, but I worship the One which rose from the dead!"

Eight Proofs of His Resurrection

We've looked at the prophecy of his resurrection; let's now see the eight proofs of his resurrection.

Firstly, the proof of human reasoning

If I came to a crossroads and I saw a dead man and a living man. Which one would I ask for directions?

Here's another example: the Roman guard put a seal on the tomb, knowing that due to the fear and weakness of both the Jews and the disciples, they

couldn't steal the body, obviously the Romans wouldn't steal the body, therefore, that only leaves God. Hebrews 13:20 tells us that it was God who (quote) "brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus"

Secondly is the proof of human testimony

There were more witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus than to the signing of the American Declaration of Independence, and yet, no one doubts that that document was signed. How is it that some try to doubt the resurrection?

The most famous clock in the world is London's Big Ben. It stands by the Houses of Parliament and towers above Westminster Abbey. It is a familiar landmark. The chimes play the tune of a hymn. The hymn is "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth."

Thirdly is the proof of human nature

People are not willing to die for something they do not believe in. Yet, the disciples were willing to give up everything, including their lives because they believed Jesus was alive.

Napoleon Bonaparte while in exile on the island of St. Helena said to Count Montholon, “Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I founded empires; but upon what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ alone founded his empire upon love, and at this hour millions of men would die for him.”

In ancient Rome a guard felt sorry for a Christian prisoner, who was soon to die because of his faith in Christ. He secretly allowed the prisoner’s daughter to visit him. After she was gone the guard stared at his prisoner.

“Why do you gaze at me?” he asked.

“Because you do not seem worried,” was the answer. “You are to die tomorrow. Tonight you saw your daughter for the last time.”

“Oh, but you are wrong,” exclaimed the prisoner. “I shall see her again. My daughter is a Christian, too. She will soon follow me. Christians never see one another for the last time. They meet in heaven, there to live forever. Now do you understand why I am happy and why I am ready to die for my risen Lord and my Christian faith?”

Fourthly is the proof of common experience

The disciples were heart-broken by the death of Jesus and hiding in fear, yet three days later they were happy and filled with power. The only explanation is that He rose from the dead.

Fifthly we see the proof of changed lives

The disciples were forever transformed after the resurrection, especially Simon Peter.

Look around you to changed lives. Sceptics may say that it is just emotion and self-will. I say that it is the transforming power of a living Saviour. 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”

“How do I know that Christ has risen? What proof have I to give?
He touched my life one blessed day, And I began to live.
How do I know he left the tomb That morning long ago?
I met Him just this morning, And my heart is

still aglow.
How do I know that endless life He gained for me that day?
His life within is proof enough of immortality.
How do I know that Christ still lives, Rich blessings to impart?
He walks with me along the way And lives within my heart."

Sixthly is the proof of time

Time is a great leveller. Dr. Harry Rimmer was lecturing in a certain place and during the question and answer period, a young Jewish man stood up and said to Dr Rimmer, "What did Jesus Christ do that no one else ever did?"

Dr Rimmer answered him this way, "Sir, you are a Jew. Would you agree with me that the Romans crucified nearly 30,000 young Jewish men?"

The questioner answered in the affirmative.

Dr. Rimmer continued by saying, All right, I will name one of those who were crucified and you name another. I name Jesus Christ.

The student said, I can't name another. Do you know why this young man could not name another Jew out of those 30,000?

Because time is the great leveller of names and events. Only one crucified Jew is known to men and His name is Jesus! He is remembered because He lives."

As an aside, we do know the name of another only because in late 1968, some tombs were uncovered northeast of Jerusalem in an area called Giv'at ha'Mivtar. There they found an ossuary (that is a container where bones are kept in a crypt) with remnants of nails and wood though the wrists and ankles.

The name was Yehohanan, the son of Hagakol - 2 out of 30,000 - one unmistakable still dead, the other unmistakably still very much alive.

Nobody directs hatred toward a dead man. When people die, hate is forgotten! Revenge is ineffectual. Yet, Satan hates Jesus, the world hates Jesus, the demons hate Jesus. Why attack a dead man? If Jesus is dead then his attackers are worse than crazy.

Seventhly is the proof of the human senses

As described in Luke 24:39-43, “Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have. 40) And when he had thus spoken, he showed them his hands and his feet. 41) And while they yet believed not for joy, and wondered, he said unto them, Have ye here any meat? 42) And they gave him a piece of a broiled fish, and of an honeycomb. 43) And he took it, and did eat before them.”

In other words, “I know what I have seen, heard, felt and tasted! How about you?”

And finally eighthly is the proof of scientific and archaeological evidence

In 1883 a newly discovered cave was identified as the tomb of Jesus by the military hero of his day, General Charles George Gordon.

That identification caused, and still provokes, waves of controversy among pilgrims who wish to visit authentic sites of the Gospels.

Even today the Garden Tomb is one of

Jerusalem's best known sites; it is visited by well over a hundred thousand tourists and pilgrims a year, visitors who imbibe its serene and sacral atmosphere.

Indeed, the tranquillity of the Garden Tomb provides a striking contrast to the city noise and tumult just outside. Interestingly, the soil was examined and it was determined that no body had ever decomposed in that tomb.

In 1929 a book was published titled, "Lord Lyttleton on the conversion of St. Paul and Gilbert West on the resurrection of Jesus Christ". In that book I read that George Lyttleton set out to disprove Paul's conversion and Gilbert West set out to disprove the resurrection. Both men were converted to Christianity as a result of their findings.

Charles Krieg of the St. Joseph's Seminary wrote that, according to a Persian legend, when God created the earth, it was barren and without any sign of life. In due time, God sent out an angel to scatter all sorts of seeds over the face of the earth. When Satan saw the seeds, he resolved to destroy God's work. He sent his helpers to bury the seeds in the hope they would rot. Soon the seeds began to germinate and to push their shoots above the soil.

What Satan did not know was that seeds had to be buried to produce living plants. And so, in due time, the entire earth became a beautiful garden of flowers and foodstuffs, and blossoming trees. An interesting legend.

Centuries after the creation of the world, Christ's enemies, in league with Satan wanted to destroy God's work. They killed our Lord and had Him buried in a tomb. They set a stone at the mouth of the tomb. They posted guards to prevent anyone from stealing His body. They wanted Christ's body to remain buried and to rot in the earth.

But, like the seed in the ground, Christ had to die and be buried in order to rise again. Just as the seed in the Persian legend, after having been buried in the earth, brought forth life, so too, Jesus, after having been buried in the earth, brought forth life. He gave us a new life; He gave us a better life now and He will give us a new life after our own death.

The Purpose of the Resurrection

And finally our pericope revealed the purpose of the resurrection.

1 Corinthians 15:13-23, “But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen:

14) And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.

15) Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not.

16) For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised:

17) And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.

18) Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished.

19) If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.

20) But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.

21) For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.

22) For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

23) But every man in his own order: Christ the first-fruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming."

Firstly, it activates the Gospel, 1 Corinthians 15:14, "And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain."

A dead Saviour saves no one! The Gospel hasn't been preached until we have told of the death, burial and the resurrection.

Secondly, it authenticates our faith, 1 Corinthians 15:17, "And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins".

The resurrection says that what we believe has power and gives hope and peace.

David Mansfield, a retired Anglican Minister from Sydney wrote that [Jesus' resurrection] "gives us genuine confidence that we will not be cockroach fodder, nor reincarnated to be the cousin of a cockroach."

Thirdly, it arranges our justification, Romans 4:25, "[Jesus] was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification".

Because Jesus lives, God had accepted His death as payment for the sins of all who will put their faith in Him. Therefore, He sees us not as sinners, but as saints through the blood of Jesus. Robert J. McCracken wrote, "A man can be as truly a saint in a factory as in a monastery, and there is as much need of him in the one as in the other".

And fourthly it anticipates our future, 1 Corinthians 15:22-23, "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. 23) But every man in his own order: Christ the first-fruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming".

Jesus is our guarantee; because He lives, we shall live also and that makes life worth living.

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall

we ever be with the Lord."

Because He lives, there shall also be a reunion some day.

1 Thessalonians 4:13, "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope."

Not too long ago, James Gordon Gilkey, one of the Christian leaders in Portland, Oregon, was told by his physician that he had fallen victim to an incurable disease. There was no possible way by which death could be averted, or even long delayed. When this man heard the news, what did he do?

Here is his own account of the hours that followed: He said, "I walked out to my home five miles from the centre of the city. There I looked at the river and the mountain that I loved, and then — as the twilight deepened — at the stars glimmering in the sky. I said to them, I may not see you many times more. But, river, I shall be alive when you have ceased your running to the sea. Mountain, I shall be alive when you have sunk down into the plain. Stars, I shall be alive when you have fallen to the sea."

Thank God, He lives! I praise the Lord for Matthew 28:6, “He is not here, for He is risen as He said. Come see the place where the Lord lay”.

Because He lives, we live!

Because He lives, we can have everlasting life.

Because He lives, life itself is worth living!

Because He lives, I want to live!

Thank God for the resurrection.

Jesus told us through John in Revelation 1:18, “I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore”.

John M C Crum wrote these lines: In the grave they laid Him, love by hatred slain, Thinking that He would never wake again, Laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen; Love is come again like wheat arising green.

Lets read it in context:

Now the green blade rises, from the buried grain. Wheat that in dark earth many days

has lain; Love lives again, that with the dead has been: Love is come again like wheat arising green.

In the grave they laid Him, Love by hatred slain, He never would awake again, laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen: Love is come again like wheat arising green.

Forth He came in triumph, like the risen grain, He that for three days in the grave had lain; raised from the dead, my risen Lord is seen: Love is come again like wheat arising green.

When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain, Your touch can call us back to life again. Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been: Love is come again like wheat arising green.

A Prayer for the Reader:

When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain, Your touch can call us back to life again.

We have a hope that burns within our hearts. Hope that is only there because You, Lord, rose from the dead.

You are He that liveth, and was dead; and is alive for evermore.

Thank You Jesus, in Your Name, Amen

Chapter 5: Why the Resurrection Matters

Pericope:

> 1 Corinthians 15:55-57, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Unbelief can ignore the resurrection, but unbelief cannot invalidate the resurrection.

Unbelief can deny the resurrection, but unbelief cannot nullify the resurrection.

Unbelief can ridicule at the resurrection, but unbelief cannot repeal the resurrection.

Unbelief can reject the resurrection, but unbelief cannot reverse the resurrection. It is as real as the hand on the end of my arm.

In a cemetery in Hanover, Germany, is a grave

on which were placed huge slabs of granite and marble cemented together and fastened with heavy steel clasps.

It belongs to a woman who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Yet strangely, she directed in her will that her grave be made so secure that if there were a resurrection, it could not reach her.

On the marker were inscribed these words: “This burial place must never be opened.”

In time, a seed, covered over by the stones, began to grow. Slowly it pushed its way through the soil and out from beneath them. As the trunk enlarged, the great slabs were gradually shifted so that the steel clasps were wrenched from their sockets.

A tiny seed had become a tree that had pushed aside the stones.

The dynamic life force contained in that little seed is a faint reflection of the tremendous power of God’s creative word that someday will call to life the bodies of all who are in their graves.

He will also bring back every person drowned at sea, cremated, or destroyed in some other way. This

is no problem to the One who made something out of nothing when He spoke the universe into existence.

Margaret Sangster Phippen wrote that in the mid 1950s her father, British minister W. E. Sangster, began to notice some uneasiness in his throat and a dragging in his leg.

When he went to the doctor, he found that he had an incurable disease that caused progressive muscular atrophy. His muscles would gradually waste away, his voice would fail, his throat would soon become unable to swallow.

Sangster threw himself into his work in British home missions, figuring he could still write and he would have even more time for prayer. “Let me stay in the struggle Lord,” he pleaded. “I don’t mind if I can no longer be a general, but give me just a regiment to lead.”

He wrote articles and books, and helped organize prayer cells throughout England. “I’m only in the kindergarten of suffering,” he told people who pitied him.

Gradually Sangster’s legs became useless. His

voice went completely. But he could still hold a pen, shakily.

On Easter morning, just a few weeks before he died, he wrote a letter to his daughter.

In it, he said, “It is terrible to wake up on Easter morning and have no voice to shout, ‘He is risen!’ — but it would be still more terrible to have a voice and not want to shout.”

I want us to look at this question. Why does the resurrection matter? What difference does it make? And who cares anyway?

I am suggesting that the resurrection matters because of at least three things: Our past can be forgiven, our present problems can be managed and our future can be secure.

Because Jesus is who He claimed to be, our past can be forgiven.

Because Jesus has the power He claimed to have, our present problems can be managed. Because Jesus does what He promises to do, our future can be secure.

Our Past Can be Forgiven

Firstly, the resurrection matters because of the good news that our past can be forgiven.

Michelangelo started forty-four statues but completed only fourteen. In a museum in Italy you can see his thirty unfinished works. There are huge blocks of marble with only a hand or a foot completed.

Many years ago my father bought some large cans of house paint at an auction. Because he arrived at the auction after it had started he had no idea what colour the paint was, only that all the cans contained the same colour and no one else seemed to be bidding for them.

So he successfully placed a bid, and for only a few shillings we had a generous supply of house paint.

We soon commenced working on the house. After preparing the surfaces, my mother, father, my two elder brothers and I began painting the house. To our horror, as this creamy white-looking paint began to dry it turned into an iridescent pink.

Can you imagine what our house began to look

like, as the only one in the street to be outrageously and flamboyantly coloured iridescent pink?

Have you ever been part way through a project and wish you could start all over again? A lot of times people feel that way about life. They get half way through life and just wish they could start all over again.

We all have things we wish we hadn't done and words things we wish we hadn't said or thought things that we wish we hadn't thought.

We all have regrets sometimes even for things we have neglected to do. We all feel sad about certain things. We all have guilt.

Fulton Oursler wrote, "We crucify ourselves between two thieves: regret for yesterday and fear of tomorrow".

We are no doubt familiar with the words of Lamentations 3:20-22, "My soul hath them still in remembrance, and is humbled in me. This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not".

Someone recently shared with me the New Living paraphrase of this same passage in Lamentations 3:20-22: “For I can never forget these awful years; always my soul will live in utter shame. Yet there is one ray of hope: His compassion never ends. It is only the Lord’s mercies that have kept us from complete destruction”.

A visitor to a sculptor’s studio said to the artist, “I saw some blocks of marble lying off in a corner. Out of one a hand emerged, out of another was a head, with face unfinished. Others had unfinished work. Why the abandoned pieces?

The artist answered: “All those pieces showed great promise on the outside, on the surface. But as I chiselled deeper, flaws and defects in the marble that were not visible on the surface showed up. They had to be abandoned.”

The difference between marble defects and human defects is that the marble cannot repent and be cleansed, but the human heart can.

The defective heart becomes the perfect heart at the touch of the Master and when we submit our heart to Him, our Master’s piece becomes a

masterpiece. The resurrection tells me that I can be forgiven.

Fortunately the colour pigments in the iridescent pink paint that we used to coat our house back in the 1960s was of such poor quality that only a month or so later the summer sun had faded it back to a rather pleasant off-white cream colour.

A counselling colleague received this letter, “I’m 31 years old and divorced, though I fought the divorce bitterly. I feel badly. I have no hope for my future. Often I go home and cry but there’s no one holding me when I cry. Nobody cares. Nothing changes and I continue to fail. I’m stressed out emotionally and I feel I’m on the verse of a collapse.”

“Something is very wrong. But I feel so hurt and embittered that I can scarcely react or relate to others any more. I feel as if I’m going to have to sit out the rest of my life in the penalty box.”

There’s the story of the grouchy old farmer who decided to plop down on the couch and take a Saturday afternoon nap. His six-year-old grandson was full of mischief and decided to take some Limburger cheese and smear it on the old man’s

moustache and beard.

The farmer woke up after a while and snorted. He mumbled, “This living room stinks!”

He walked into the kitchen. “This kitchen stinks!” he grumped.

He went out to his vegetable garden in the back of the house and snarled, “This garden stinks!”

He went over to his corn field and yelled, “This cornfield stinks!”

Finally, he stood up at the top of the hill and took a deep breath and shouted, “This whole world stinks!”

In reality, the only thing that stunk was the old farmer.

Colossians 2:14 has some good news for these two people. Colossians 2:14 reads, “[God] has forgiven all our sins and cancelled every record of the debt we owe. Christ has done away with it by nailing it to the cross.”

This is God’s patient and perfect, permanent,

proper pardon programme.

He says He nailed it all to the cross. Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross so we can quit nailing ourselves to the cross.

He was hung up for our hang-ups.

And because Jesus paid for our guilt, we don't have to pay for it. He wants to forgive our past.

The tragedy is that a lot of people can't get on with the present, let alone the future, because they're stuck in the past. Some guilt or regret or something has tied them down.

Sometimes it's a former relationship and they're letting it mess up their current relationship. They're living a half-life with this emotional baggage, trying to live life and they're wondering why they're not happy.

Because Jesus is who He said it was, our past can be forgiven. We don't have to go carrying a load of unnecessary guilt around. That's the first reason that the resurrection matters.

Our Present Problems Can be Managed

Secondly, the resurrection matters because of the good news that our present problems can be managed.

Without divine help, much of life is unmanageable. Especially if you're a parent. The American author Charlie Shedd tells a revealing story about himself.

He says, "Before we had kids I use to travel across the country teaching a lecture I called `The Ten Commandments for Raising Perfect Kids'. This was before I had any children."

After he and Martha had their first child, he changed it to "Ten Hints for Parents".

After their second child, he relabelled the lecture, "A Few Tentative Suggestions For Fellow Strugglers."

He said after the arrival of the third child he gave up speaking on parenting altogether.

Maturity is when you figure out that you don't have it all figured out.

Maturity is when we realize that, on our own, we can't manage all that life is going to send to us. But here's the good news. Although we can't control everything in our life, God can.

Tragedies and similar life events can happen in the blink of an eye, however God never blinks.

Ephesians 1:20 in a modern translation reads, "How incredibly great is His power to help those who believe Him, the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead."

The same power than enabled Jesus to rise from death will help us rise above our problems.

The same power that God used at resurrection time two thousand years ago can be used in our life right now. We don't know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future.

We don't know what's going to happen next year, next month, next week. I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow and neither do you. But it doesn't matter.

Because even though it's out of our control, it's not out of God's control. He will give us the power

to face it.

Philippians 4:13 says, and orrect me if I'm reading it wrong, Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through the power of positive thinking"

Or does Philippians 4:13 read, "I can do all things because I psyched myself up."

Or, "I can do all things because the Pastor is a good friend of mine and he'll put in a good word for me."

Or does it say, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.

Maybe your translation says, "I'm ready for anything through the strength of Christ who lives in me."

Why does the resurrection matter? Because our past can be forgiven, our present can be managed, and the resurrection matters because of the good news that our future can be secure.

Our past can be forgiven, our present problems can be managed and, thirdly, our future can be secure.

Our Future Can be Secure.

Author Robert Flatt wrote, “The resurrection gives my life meaning and direction and the opportunity to start over no matter what my circumstances.”

A man stopped to watch a ball game between two young teams. As he walked toward the bleachers, he asked one of the players, “What is the score?”

The young fellow replied, “We are behind 18 to nothing.”

“Well,” said the man, “I must say you don’t look discouraged.”

“Discouraged?” the player said with a puzzled look. “Why should we be discouraged? I haven’t had my turn to bat yet.”

The army of Israel faced a giant, but a young man named David thought, “I have not had my turn yet.” And Goliath fell.

The twelve disciples saw over 5,000 hungry people and said, “Send the crowds away, so they can buy some food.” But Jesus said, in effect, “I have not

had My turn yet!" And 5,000 men plus women and children were miraculously fed.

The angry mob had Pilate seal the tomb where Jesus was buried, but God knew, "I have not had My turn yet!" And Jesus rose from the dead.

One of the universal problems we all have to face is death. Death for us eventually has a 100% success rate. Only a fool would go all through life unprepared for something he knows is inevitable. Sometimes we get so busy in the here and now we don't stop to think about what's going to come. We don't even like to talk about it.

Rick Warren tells us that a teacher asked some children to write sentences about what they believed about death.

Gilda, age 8, said, "When you die they put you in a box and bury you in the ground because you don't look too good."

Stephanie, aged 9, said, "Doctors help you so you won't die until you pay their bill."

Marsha, aged 9, said, "When you die, you don't have to do homework in heaven unless your teacher

is there too."

Raymond, aged 10, said, "A good doctor can help you so you won't die. A bad doctor sends you to heaven."

Alfred Lord Tennyson expressed his belief in the resurrection in his poem, "Crossing the Bar." He gave instructions that it was to appear in every book of his poems that should ever be published, and always at the end of the book.

He wanted all who read his works to see this assertion of faith in the face of death and know that the resurrection matters because of the good news that our future can be secure.

He compares death with crossing the 'sandbar between the river of life, with its outgoing 'flood', and the ocean that lies beyond death, the 'boundless deep'.

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar.

Around the time of Christ, Lucius Annaeus Seneca wrote, “As the mother’s womb holds us for nine months, making us ready, not for the womb itself, but for life, just so, through our lives, we are making ourselves ready for another [type of] birth.... Therefore, look forward without fear to that appointed hour — the last hour of the body ....”

“That day, which you fear as being the end of

all things, is [after a brief sleep, the day we wake up to] eternity.

I read an interesting and well-written book by a Sydney Anglican Minister, David Mansfield. The book was titled, “About Life that’s Worth Living and Lasts Forever”.

In that book, Mansfield wrote, “[Jesus’ resurrection] gives us genuine confidence that we will not be cockroach fodder, nor reincarnated to be the cousin of a cockroach.”

Our Future Can be Secure

The resurrection matters because of the good news that our future can be secure.

Winston Churchill arranged his own funeral. There were stately hymns in St. Paul’s Cathedral and an impressive liturgy.

But at the end of the service, Churchill had an unusual event planned. When they finished the benediction, a bugler high in the dome of St. Paul’s Cathedral on one side played Taps, the universal signal that the day is over.

There was a silent pause. Then a bugler on the other side played Reveille, the military wake-up call.

It was Churchill's way of communicating that he had an expectation that having said "goodbye" here, after what would be for him a mere pause, he would be resurrected with the wake-up call of the angel's trumpet (1 Thessalonians 4:15, 16).

The purpose of the Second Coming is for Jesus to receive the people who have served Him in all ages. This is the good news that our future can be secure.

Author James S. Hewett tells the true story about a distinguished man, the only white person buried in a Georgia cemetery reserved exclusively for blacks.

He had lost his mother when he was just a baby. His father, who never married again, hired a black woman named Mandy to help raise his son. She was a Christian, and she took her task seriously. Seldom has a motherless boy received such warm-hearted attention.

One of his earliest memories was of Mandy bending tenderly over him in his upstairs bedroom

each day and softly saying, “Wake up — God’s mornin’ is come”.

As the years passed this devoted woman continued to serve as his surrogate mother. The young man went away to college, but when he would come home on holidays and in the summer she would still climb the stairs and call him in the same loving way.

One day after he had become a successful statesman, the sad message came: “Mandy is dead. Can you attend her funeral?”

As he stood by her grave in the cemetery, he turned to his friends and said, “If I die before Jesus comes, I want to be buried here beside Mandy. I like to think that on Resurrection Day she’ll speak to me again and say, ‘Wake up, my boy, God’s mornin’ is come’!”

Toward the end of his life, the prolific writer Victor Hugo penned these words: “I feel within me that future life. I am like a forest that has been razed; the new shoots are stronger and brighter. I shall most certainly rise toward the heavens — the nearer my approach to the end, the plainer is the sound of immortal symphonies of worlds which invite me.”

“For half a century I have been translating my thoughts into prose and verse: history, philosophy, drama, romance, tradition, satire, ode, and song; all of these I have tried. But I feel I haven’t given utterance to the thousandth part of what lies with me.”

“When I go to the grave I can say, as others have said, ‘My day’s work is done.’ But I cannot say, ‘My life is done.’ My work will recommence the next morning. The tomb is not a blind alley; it is a thoroughfare. It closes upon the twilight but opens upon the dawn”.

For many centuries the men and women in Europe looked out upon the western sea, what we now call the Atlantic Ocean, and they saw the sun reflecting upon the glittering surface of the waters and they wondered if there was anything beyond.

Scholars said that you could sail off the edge of the world, as there was nothing out there at all. Cartographers of the time when making their maps drew a dotted line along the borders and, not knowing what was beyond, wrote, ‘Here be the dragons’.

In fact, inscribed on the escutcheons of the coat-of-arms of the nation of Spain was its national

motto, *Ne Plus Ultra*, meaning, "There is nothing beyond." Chris Columbus had other ideas.

One day Chris, a 63-year-old explorer, went westering into the setting sun and descended into the blackness of the unknown. People waited expectantly, and finally after a long time the sails reappeared and the crowds were exultant. They shouted with joy, and Chris announced that there is a land beyond the sea that is rich beyond your wildest dreams. It is a glorious paradise beyond your greatest expectations. The king of Spain changed the motto of that land until it reads as it does today, *Plus Ultra*, meaning, "There is more beyond."

For many centuries innumerable people stood beside the dark hole that we call a grave and watched the remains of their loved ones lowered into the earth, and they wondered: "Beyond the dark waters of death, is there anything beyond?"

Then one day, Chris, a 33-year-old explorer went westering into the setting sun and descended into the blackness of the unknown. He sailed off the edge of the world and crashed into a borrowed tomb. People waited expectantly. Finally on Resurrection morning, as the sun arose in the east, the Son of God

stepped forth from a grave and announced that there is a land beyond the grave that is rich beyond our wildest dreams. It is a glorious paradise beyond our greatest expectations. And there awaits a heavenly Father, waiting with outstretched arms to wipe away every tear from our eyes."

The resurrection matters because our past can be forgiven, secondly our present problems can be managed and, thirdly our future can be secure.

"How do I know that Christ has risen? What proof have I to give? He touched my life one blessed day, And I began to live.

How do I know he left the tomb That morning long ago? I met Him just this morning, And my heart is still aglow.

How do I know that endless life He gained for me that day? His life within is proof enough of immortality.

How do I know that Christ still lives, Rich blessings to impart? He walks with me along the way And lives within my heart."

A number of years ago I filmed a documentary to promote the ministry of the Crossroads Christian Fellowship to the Disabled in Newcastle, New South Wales.

As I filmed one of their gatherings, I was moved to tears by about 50 persons, some quite severely disabled and many obviously in great pain, singing with gusto and enthusiasm, some with slurred voices, others with distorted facial features, some with contorted bodies, most in wheelchairs unintentionally advertising their disabilities.

And what were they singing? It was the 1933 hymn by Alfred H Ackley, 'He Lives'.

I serve a risen Saviour, He's in the world today; I know that He is living, whatever men may say; I see His hand of mercy, I hear His voice of cheer and just the time I need Him He's always near.

He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today! He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way. He lives, He lives, salvation to impart! You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart.

In all the world around me I see His loving care, and tho' my heart grows weary I never will despair; I know that He is leading thru all the stormy blast, the day of His appearing will come at last.

He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today! He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way. He lives, He lives, salvation to impart! You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart.

Rejoice, rejoice, O Christian, lift up your voice and sing, eternal hallelujahs to Jesus Christ the King! The hope of all who seek Him, the help of all who find, none other is so loving, so good and kind.

He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today! He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way. He lives, He lives, salvation to impart! You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart."

A Prayer for the Reader:

Lord, if in this life only we have hope in You, we are of all people most miserable.

But now You have risen from the dead, and we see how much this resurrection really matters.

Thank you for this hope. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Chapter 6: Easter Hope

Pericope:

> John 20:19-20, "Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. And when he had so said, he showed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord".

John Stott wrote, "Christianity is in its very essence a resurrection religion. The concept of resurrection lies at its heart. If you remove it, Christianity is destroyed".

Louis Cassels takes this a step further when he writes, "If you are irrevocably committed to the proposition that it would have been impossible for Christ to triumph over death, you may as well quit fiddling around the fringes of Christianity, because,

as [the apostle] Paul bluntly said, the whole thing stands or falls on the fact of the Resurrection. Either it happened, or it didn't, and if it didn't, Christianity is a gigantic fraud, and the sooner we are quit of it, the better".

Once you get the resurrection straight, everything else eventually falls into place. This point was brought home forcefully to Bishop NT Wright of the University of St Andrews when he was in a cab, stuck in a traffic jam in London.

The taxi driver, seeing from his clothes that he was a bishop, commented on what a difficult time the Anglicans were having over the issue of women bishops. Bishop Wright agreed, they were indeed having a difficult time.

Then came the moment he says that he will never forget. Turning round to face him – they were, as he said, stationary in the traffic – the Cabbie said, 'What I always say is this: If God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, everything else is basically rock'n'roll, i'n'it?'

In other words, if God raised Jesus Christ from the dead then everything else about our faith falls into place. Bishop Wright went on to say that was a great gospel moment for him that he has almost literally dined out on ever since.

That message is at the heart of what I want to explore with you in this chapter.

Phil, a Jewish friend of mine, recently asked me what he called the ‘desert island question’ He asked which two chapters of the Bible I would be grateful for if I was stranded on a desert island.

I responded without hesitation saying Romans chapter 8 and John chapter 20. Those two chapters, although written in very different styles and modes, contain so much gospel, rich, dense, pressed down and running over that I treasure them immensely.

We’re looking at the twentieth chapter of John’s gospel, which is one of the most extraordinary and evocative parts of that already extraordinary and evocative book.

Let’s read again John 20:19 and continue through to verse 23.

John 20:19-23, “Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. And when he had so said, he showed unto them his hands and his side.”

“Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord. Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained”.

Right at the start of this passage comes an introduction that tells us what it’s all about – though it would be easy to miss because of the drama that’s going on.

It was, says John, the evening of that day, the first day of the week. That phrase, ‘the first day of the week’, was the phrase with which chapter 20 began.

When an author repeats himself like this,

something important is going on.

John's gospel is book-ended with echoes of Genesis 1, starting as it does with 'In the beginning' in John 1 verse 1, and ending with 'Amen" at the conclusion of verse 25 in Chapter 21.

Now in chapter 20 verse 19, he says the old week is over. On the sixth day, the Friday of the creation story, God created man in his own image and more than likely when he brought man out of the dust would have said to the watching angels, 'Behold the man.'

On the Friday in John's redemption story when Pontius Pilate brought Jesus out of the courtroom he said to the waiting crowd, 'Behold the man.'

And by the evening of Friday Jesus has declared what God declared at the end of the Genesis record: it is finished. It's done. As the Father through the Son finished the work of creation, so the Son, approved by the Father, has finished the work of redemption.

Then, on the seventh day, the Saturday, God rests from creation, his work complete. And now after the crucifixion, God incarnate rests in the tomb, his work complete.

John Chapter 20 began 'On the first day of the week, very early, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb' and she found it empty because this was the first day of God's new world, God's new creation.

Sometimes we imagine that the point of the Easter stories is to provide a sort of happy ending after the sorrow of the previous week, or to assure us that there is a life after death, or something like that.

This is all very true, however what John is saying is far more powerful and relevant to our church life and witness today and tomorrow. He is telling us that Easter is the beginning of God's new creation,

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Robert Flatt acknowledged this when he wrote, “The resurrection gives my life meaning and direction and the opportunity to start over no matter what my circumstances”.

And more than John telling us that Easter is the beginning of God’s new creation, he reminds us that we therefore have a job to do.

The completed work of God in creation was followed with work for the pinnacle of His creation. Man. Genesis 2:15, “And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it”. First occupation: Caring for the planet.

Verse 19, “And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them”. Second occupation: Seeing God’s Name written in creation.

The completed work of the Son in redemption was also followed with a work for His creation: You and me. We are to care for this Planet. First occupation: Caring for the planet.

And we are to give God's names to the nations. Second occupation: Sharing God's Name to all creation. Acts 1:8 - Jesus said, "Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."

God's completed work, and our assigned work, is what John Chapter 20 verses 19 and onwards is all about.

The scene begins in verse 19, after that powerful opening, with the disciples hiding behind locked doors because they are afraid that the Judaean authorities who arrested Jesus and handed him over to be killed will come for them as well.

But there are no locked doors in the kingdom of God. Jesus came and stood in the middle of them. 'Peace be with you,' he said, and he showed them his hands and his side.

Professor NT Wright said that if we were setting this scene in John 20 verse 20 to music we would want at that point a moment of great awe and drama, because not only do the wounds in Jesus' hands and side indicate that it really is him, risen bodily from the dead; they are the signs, the marks of

love, the ready evidence that having loved his own who were in the world he had loved them to the end, had given himself utterly for them, for us, for you and me.

Perhaps this is why the resurrection of Jesus is so hard for many to believe. We all observe death as irreversible; people in the ancient world knew that just as much as we do. That's because our world is bounded by the old creation, even though Easter is the beginning of God's new creation.

In the same way, we all find it hard to believe that we have been loved utterly and completely by the God who made the world. We know the frailty and fickleness of human love and we find it hard, even impossible, to imagine a love that will go all the way, that will last the course.

The two go together, because the Easter message is the also message of that unutterable, inexhaustible love.

The faith that believes the resurrection is the same thing as the love that opens up like a flower to answer Jesus' love with a trembling love of its own.

Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote that ‘it is love that believes the resurrection’.

In the early 1900s John Macleod Campbell Crum linked love and resurrection when he wrote of Jesus: *“Forth He came in triumph, like the risen grain. He that for three days in the grave had lain; raised from the dead, my living Lord is seen; love is come again like wheat arising green.*

One evening in 1874, Pastor Robert Lowry was reading again the account of Christ’s resurrection. Soon, Lowry found himself at the pump organ in the parlour of his home; and in a matter of minutes he had completed the words and the music of a new hymn.

Listen to these words (also mentioned in a previous chapter): *“Up from the grave He arose, with a mighty triumph o’er His foes. He arose a Victor from the dark domain and He lives forever with His saints to reign. He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!”*

John says that the disciples were overjoyed is putting it mildly. This is certainly an understatement, but yet understatement is best way to put forth earth-

shaking ideas. In fact I could facetiously suggest that in John 20:20 that with 20:20 vision they saw Jesus alive.

Jurgen Moltmann recognised this when he wrote, “Easter is the beginning of the laughter of the redeemed and the dance of the liberated … Easter is God’s protest against death”.

George Herbert when he discovered resurrection after contemplating the crucifixion wrote, “Who would have thought my shrivelled heart could have recovered greenness? It was gone quite underground …”.

But Jesus who in death slept underground on that cold Sabbath has come forth once more, and with him God’s powerful love revealed in all its glory.

Those in the Northern Hemisphere are able to link Easter with the commencement of the spring season. A common refrain is, “Green the grass. Ripe the bud. Yellow the flower. Blue the sky. Beautiful the butterfly. Risen the Lord!”.

Charles Spurgeon re-worded a poem by Beattie with these words: “‘Tis night and the landscape is

lovely no more; yet ... morn is approaching, your charms to restore. The spring shall yet visit the mouldering urn; the day shall yet dawn on the night of the grave."

Contemplating Christ's resurrection brings our own hearts out of their own winter hibernation into the fresh spring of Easter, even down here in the antipodes.

The disciples were not to stay in the locked room. 'Peace be with you,' says Jesus again. 'As the father has sent me, so I'm sending you.' And then, with another echo of Genesis, he breathes on them and says 'Receive the holy spirit.' And in those two sentences the whole mission of the church is contained. 'As' followed by 'so.'

Think back through all that has gone before in the gospel story. Jesus comes into Galilee announcing God's kingdom, healing the sick and celebrating the good news with the most unlikely people.

He challenges God's people to be truly God's people, the light of the world, now that He's there to show them the way. He speaks of the coming victory that he will win through the strangest means, through

his own death.

He hints at the new temple that is to be built, a new temple consisting not of bricks and mortar but of himself and his followers. He does all this and much, much more. And now he scoops all of that up into one phrase, ‘as the father sent me’; and turns it round into the great commission: ‘so I’m sending you.’

CS Lewis in his book, ‘The Weight of Glory’ wrote, “At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door”.

And as there are no locked doors in the kingdom of God, we who are charged to go into the world with the good news must pray them open so that the message of God’s unconquerable love can get in.

Yes, I didn’t write, ‘Pry them open’ I wrote, ‘Pray them open’.

As a parent will not rest until the last traces of the illness have been removed from their child, so God will not tolerate the disease of sin within his new creation. So the message of forgiveness is included

in this chapter.

Easter says, ‘Welcome to God’s new world’, and with that we are invited to taste that forgiveness for ourselves and to hold it out to the world as the great message of hope.

Let’s read on in John Chapter 20 from verse 24. *John 20:24, “But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus [the twin], was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.”*

“And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you. Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing”.

John Vannorsdall asks, “If God raised Jesus from the dead, why didn’t God fix him up? Why scars? Why the print of nails that you could feel with your fingers?”

Someone has written that God lets you love the question until you can live the answer.

Vannorsdall answers his own question by suggesting that the gospel words are saying to us in our waiting: ‘You will not see Jesus Christ unless you see the wounds’.

He says, “Somehow we must understand that the resurrected Christ is forever the wounded Christ. Living, but never fixed up. Not bound by death, yet scarred for eternity”.

Many years ago my wife, my eldest son and I did a course in sign language for the deaf and hearing impaired.

One sign we were taught is the sign for Jesus. The middle finger of each hand is alternately placed into the palm or onto the wrist of the other, signifying Jesus, the one with wounded hands. And when the signers touch the place, they remember and hear the

name in their own flesh.

Let's continue reading John Chapter 20 from verse 28.

John 20:28, "And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God. Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed".

"And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name."

People find this great message of hope difficult if not impossible to believe. The story of Thomas says it all. We live in a world of Thomases, of people who want evidence, people who don't want to be taken in; people who've been hurt before and resist what they see as a cheap and easy consolation.

We live in a world where many who grew up in our churches feel horribly let down, either because the people they knew there weren't living what they

professed, or because, worse, some of them used their position as a cloak for greed or lust or bullying or sexual abuse, or just because the churches appeared to be living in a stale, dusty world of shrunken, sad and shrivelled humanness when these seekers were discovering the beauty and glory of life and literature and love and laughter.

And so, like Thomas, they hear what sounds like an old fantasy-message: “Oh yes, it’s all right really, he’s alive, come back to church like you used to…” . And they fold their arms and say, No, I’m not going to be taken in again, I’m not going back into that stifling little world where I felt cramped and constrained. Anyway, if I allow myself to hope like that I’ll only be disappointed and hurt again.

There are many like that on the edges of (and beyond) churches of all denominations. They want something more solid, more substantial, to go on.

And Jesus doesn’t deny Thomas what he asks for. You want evidence? Very well, here it is: here are the wounds which love has borne, here are the marks of what it cost to complete the work, to finish the world’s redemption.

The evidence is not just intellectual evidence, though if that's what's wanted that is there too, in plenty. The evidence is the evidence of a living Jesus, a loving Jesus and a Jesus who has done everything Thomas needed.

'Bring your finger here,' he says, 'and inspect my hands. Bring your hand here and put it into my side. Don't be faithless! Just believe!'

In earnest criticism, Ernest Renan said, "You Christians are living on the fragrance of an empty vase." He referred, of course, to the empty tomb.

But the apostolic witnesses never appealed to the empty tomb as proof of the resurrection. They appealed to Christ's appearances, to the fact that he ate with them, and to his ever-present power. Rudolf Bultmann said that the disciples' believing led to their seeing; John chapter 20 says that their seeing led to their believing.

The question for us as we learn again and again the lessons of hope for ourselves, is the challenge of how we can be for the world what Jesus was for Thomas.

How we can show to the world the signs of love so that suddenly resurrection makes sense, suddenly the idea of God's love in new creation makes sense, and the people who were formerly sceptical will find their hearts and minds transformed so that they say, with Thomas, 'My Lord and my God'.

Yes, it might have been better if they had believed without seeing. But Jesus isn't fussy. Jesus will meet Thomas part way, because the new life of the Easter gospel is always going out to meet people part way, to surprise them once again with the overflowing and powerful love of God.

And our task, in the power of the Spirit, is always to be meeting the world half way with the surprising signs of God's generosity.

If you have not encountered the Jesus of the resurrection yet, God wants to meet you part way today. He wants to meet you wherever you are with his gospel of peace. He may not leave you here but He will meet you here. And that's a promise.

About 1930, the Communist leader Bukharin journeyed from Moscow to Kiev. His mission was to address a huge assembly. His subject was atheism.

For a solid hour he aimed his heavy artillery at Christianity, hurling argument and ridicule.

At last he was finished and viewed what seemed to be the smouldering ashes of men's faith. "Are there any questions?" Bukharin demanded.

A solitary man arose and asked permission to speak. He mounted the platform and moved close to the Communist. The audience was breathlessly silent as the man surveyed them first to the right, then to the left.

At last he shouted the ancient Russian Orthodox greeting, "Christ is Risen!" The vast assembly arose as one man and the response came crashing like the sound of an avalanche, "He is Risen Indeed!"

The message of Easter in regards to death is that God has the last word!

1 Corinthians 15:55-57 reads, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ".

In parts of Yugoslavia, it is still the custom to put food on the grave up to forty days after death. Sure enough, the food disappears. Local people call it the 'gypsy cafeteria.' We put flowers on graves, not food.

We no more imagine that the dead will smell the flowers than Yugoslavs really believe that the dead will eat the food. We do it because we ourselves need to remember, need to be grateful, need some tangible expression of grief.

But we are certain that some day the dead will rise, not to smell the flowers, nor to eat and drink as before, but to live eternally.

In the early 1970s I was asked to sing for a radio broadcast of an Easter Service. I was given the sheet music and lyrics for a recently released contemporary song and told that I could sing it or choose another song or hymn.

After reading the lines, "Greater still the calm assurance, this child can face uncertain days because he lives", I wondered how a child could possibly have assurance if they were going to have to face uncertain days simply because they were living. As a

consequence I sang a different item for the broadcast.

About a decade later I was facing the possibility of uncertainty myself with a rather negative medical diagnosis.

Was it not for my firm belief in the risen Saviour my faith would certainly have wavered.

It was around this time that I heard a gramophone recording of this song in a café and the intent of the composers Gloria and William Gaither came clear, the ‘He lives’ was talking about the risen Christ not the anxious child.

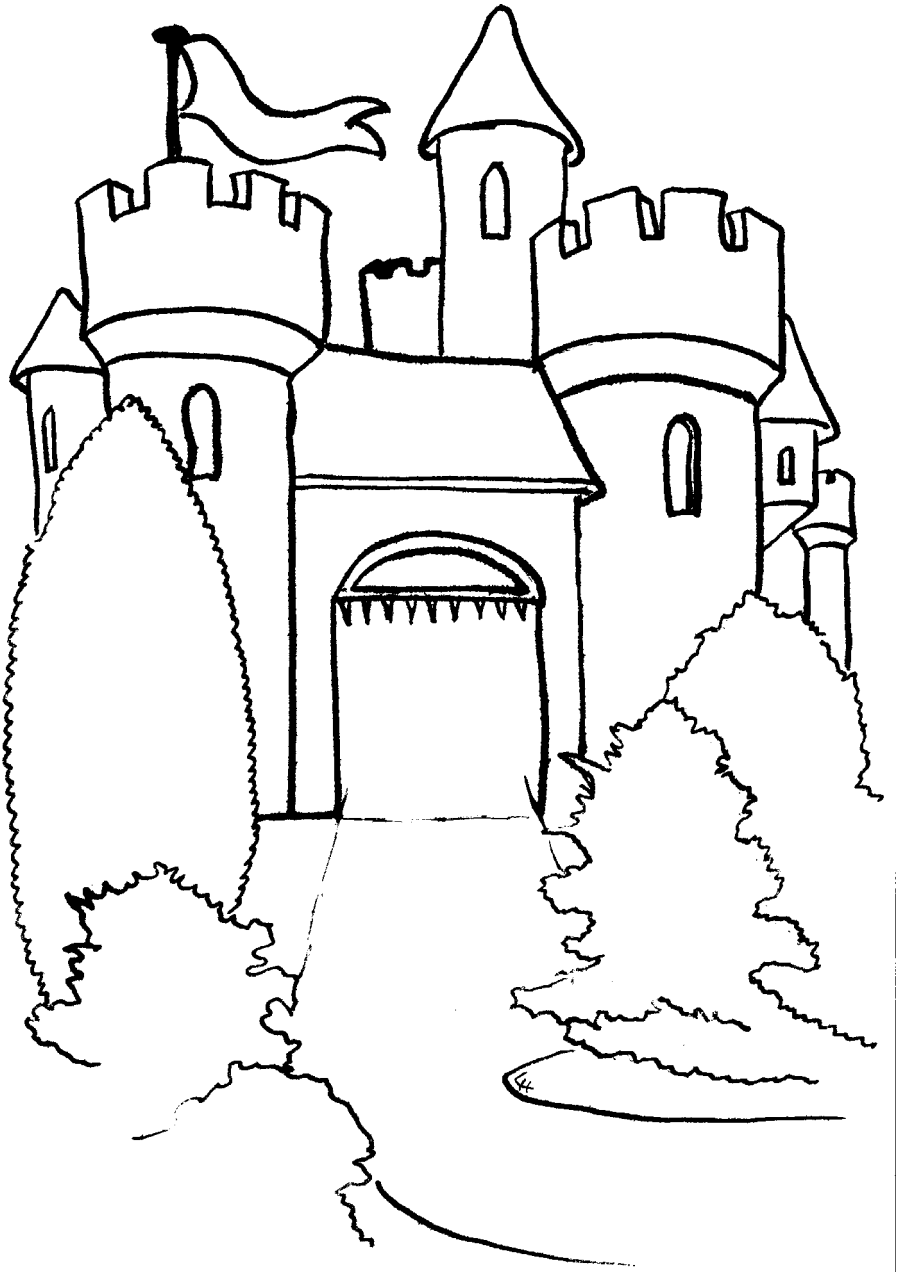
Although I do not list this among my favourites, nevertheless the words are still relevant.

God sent His Son, they called Him Jesus, He came to love, heal, and forgive; He lived and died to buy my pardon, an empty grave is there to prove my Saviour lives. Because He lives I can face tomorrow, because He lives all fear is gone; because I know He holds the future. and life is worth the living just because He lives.

How sweet to hold a newborn baby, and feel the pride, and joy he gives; but greater still the calm assurance, this child can face uncertain days because He lives. Because He lives I can face tomorrow, because He lives all fear is gone; because I know He holds the future. and life is worth the living just because He lives.

A Prayer for the Reader

Lord when we seek the Jesus who was crucified, died and was buried, Thank You that the angel tells us through the gospels that he is risen; He is risen indeed. Thank you that we can serve a risen Saviour who's in the world today. Thank you that because of Your life we can have an eternity in the life to come and an abundant life here and now. Help us to share this gospel with those we meet each day. In Jesus' Name, Amen



Chapter 7: The Best is Yet to Come

Pericope:

Revelation 21:1-7, “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.

2) And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

3) And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

4) And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for

the former things are passed away.

5) And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful.

6) And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.

7) He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son."

On my wedding day in 1984 I was telling the Best Man, a close friend about 15 years my senior, how much I enjoyed the company of Rosemary, the woman I was soon to marry.

I spoke of how much we loved to share in conversation and had such a common bond through our religious faith.

I remember his words well; although I am not exactly sure of what he was thinking when he said it, as we were interrupted by the arrival of the bride before the conversation could continue.

He said, *"Lionel, the best is yet to come."*

Well, I immediately agreed when I saw her walking up the aisle toward me and after all these years of marriage, I still agree with his sentiments, as the friendship my wife and I share just gets better and better.

I have been writing and presenting health and lifestyle seminars since 1965 covering over an hundred different topics. Someone asked me recently, "Which is the best seminar that you have ever presented?"

Without hesitation, I replied, "The next one!"

As I make a conscious choice to review and continually update my presentations both in content and delivery, I believe that the best is yet to come.

Not only does the Bible contribute to our belief that the best is yet to come, but the things of our daily lives reveal that this is true, too. It is this belief that

keeps the scientist, inventor, and researcher busy.

The best car hasn't been developed; the final cure hasn't been discovered; the safest plane hasn't been produced; the best song hasn't been written; the best product is not yet on the market; the best church hasn't been grown; the best sales presentation has not been perfected; the best class hasn't been taught nor best teacher found; the best way hasn't been found; the best is yet to come.

The phrase 'The best is yet to come' is a positive affirmation that gives life direction. It provides the hope that there is more to come in this life as well as the next.

It's the spirit of expectancy that good things are going to happen.

It is seeing life through eyes that look for opportunities that will be greater than ever.

It is received through proper planning and work.

Desire is the fuel that makes it a reality.

Not everyone is ready to accept the fact that

the best is yet to come. This is true for a number of reasons.

Some are resigned to live in the past. They dwell in the “good old days.”

Many are content to live mediocre lives. They are satisfied to drift from day to day.

Insecurity hinders many persons from believing that the best is yet to come. They want to hold on to their position or things. They will never know the excitement of launching out by faith, or waiting for the great things of tomorrow.

Like Mark Twain they believe that nobody likes change except a wet baby.

Negative thinking guides the decisions and attitudes of many people. They choose to accept the premise that the worst is yet to come.

They will get what they wish for if they are not careful.

Scores of people have no goals for their lives. They don’t know where they are going today, much less tomorrow.

A few think they don't have any needs. They are pleased with the way things are in their lives. There is always room for improvement in everyone's life; I know that there is room in mine for improvement.

And finally, fear is always a major enemy to progress. It hinders a person from becoming excited about the future.

2 Timothy 1:7 says, " For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind".

And in 1 John 4:18, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear".

In John 13:37 and 38 Jesus told Peter that the disciple would deny Him: "Peter said unto him, Lord, why cannot I follow thee now? I will lay down my life for thy sake. Jesus answered him, Wilt thou lay down thy life for my sake? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, The cock shall not crow, till thou hast denied me thrice."

How sad for

Peter. Now, because there were no chapter divisions when the Bible was written, we hear Jesus

immediately sharing the words we read in chapter 14 verse 1 and following, telling peter, in essence, that the best is yet to come.

John 14:1, “Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.”

Verse 3, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth...”

“I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. ...my Father will love (you), and we will come unto (you), and make our abode with (you). ... the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.”

And verse 27, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it

be afraid."

The best is yet to come. Reading from 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, 'The Message': "…we're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace. These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us. There's far more here than meets the eye. The things we see now are here today, gone tomorrow. But the things we can't see now will last forever."

And the conversation continues in 2 Corinthians 5:1, "For instance, we know that when these bodies of ours are taken down like tents and folded away, they will be replaced by resurrection bodies in heaven — God-made, not handmade — and we'll never have to relocate our 'tents' again. Sometimes we can hardly wait to move — and so we cry out in frustration."

Peterson adds, "Compared to what's coming, living conditions around here seem like a stopover in an unfurnished shack, and we're tired of it! We've

been given a glimpse of the real thing, our true home, our resurrection bodies! The Spirit of God whets our appetite by giving us a taste of what's ahead. He puts a little of heaven in our hearts so that we'll never settle for less."

Verse 6, "That's why we live with such good cheer. You won't see us drooping our heads or dragging our feet! Cramped conditions here don't get us down. They only remind us of the spacious living conditions ahead. It's what we trust in but don't yet see that keeps us going. Do you suppose a few ruts in the road or rocks in the path are going to stop us? When the time comes, we'll be plenty ready to exchange exile for homecoming."

The American Free Methodist pastor Michael De Rosa shares a relevant story.

There was a woman who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and had been given three months to live.

So as she was getting her things "in order," she contacted her pastor and had him come to her house to discuss certain aspects of her final wishes.

She told him which songs she wanted sung at the service, what scriptures she would like read, and what outfit she wanted to be buried in. The woman also requested to be buried with her favourite Bible.

Everything was in order and the pastor was preparing to leave when the woman suddenly remembered something very important to her. There's one more thing," she said excitedly.

"What's that?" came the pastor's reply.

"This is very important," the woman continued. "I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand." The pastor stood looking at the woman, not knowing quite what to say.

"That surprises you, doesn't it?" the woman asked.

"Well, to be honest, I'm puzzled by the request," said the pastor.

The woman explained. "In all my years of attending church socials and potluck dinners, I always remember that when the dishes of the main course were being cleared, someone would inevitably lean over and say, 'Keep your fork.' It was my favourite

part because I knew that something better was coming...like velvety chocolate cake or deep-dish apple pie. Something wonderful, and with substance!

So, I just want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand and I want them to wonder "What's with the fork?'. Then I want you to tell them: "Keep your fork....the best is yet to come."

The pastor's eyes welled up with tears of joy as he hugged the woman good-bye. He knew this would be one of the last times he would see her before her death.

But he also knew that the woman had a better grasp of heaven than he did. She KNEW that something better was coming.

At the funeral people were walking by the woman's casket and they saw the pretty dress she was wearing and her favourite Bible and the fork placed in her right hand.

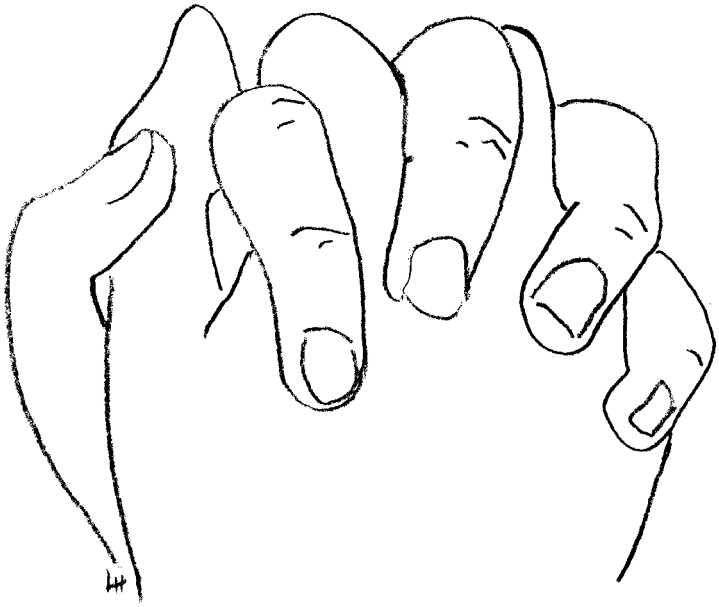
Over and over, the pastor heard the question "What's with the fork?" And over and over he smiled.

During his message, the pastor told the people of the conversation he had with the woman shortly

before she died. He also told them about the fork and how symbolized for her that “The best is yet to come”.

The pastor told the people how he could not stop thinking about the fork and told them that they probably would not be able to stop thinking about it either.

I started this chapter telling of a wedding and as I conclude with this story of a funeral, please remember that each time you reach for your fork, each time you are feeling lost, lonely, hurting , grieving or despairing, please remember these words and rejoice with me that, “The best is yet to come”.



A Prayer for the Reader:

Let us pray. “Like a plane bursting through the clouds into the glorious sunshine, in faith, we are expecting that the best is yet to come.

Please, Lord, reinforce in our minds and hearts this attitude of optimistic expectance, knowing that You are always faithful, all your promises are ‘yea’ and ‘amen’.

And now may the blessing of God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and the Lord Jesus Christ be upon each one of us, in Jesus’ Name, Amen.”